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31 October 1980

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The New Belgian Government and TNF

Prime Minister Wilfried Martens' fourth government since 1979 is a reprise of his second government that fell last April--a coalition of Social Christians and Socialists. Just as the raison d'etre of the third cabinet was progress on regionalization and linguistic questions, the purpose of the new Martens government is to deal with severe economic problems. In the recent past, TNF took a back seat to regionalization; this time TNF enjoys a lower priority than budget and tax problems. []

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As usual in Belgian coalition politics, the Social Christian and Socialist partners have agreed only on a broad outline for dealing with the economy. Because the potential for divisions between the parties is high on any number of issues, Martens is reluctant to add TNF to his burdens. Therefore, the vague TNF formula agreed upon prior to the government crisis in September--the Belgians tied deployment of cruise missiles to their perception of progress in US-Soviet arms control negotiations--has been maintained in order to remove the contentious "Euromissile" issue from the cabinet's agenda for the time being. The TNF issue is unlikely to arise unless or until US-Soviet negotiations are well underway, or there is a dramatic change in the international or Belgian domestic environments--a situation which probably satisfies most Belgian politicians. []

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Prior to the fall of the Martens' third government this month, Belgian TNF proponents, notably Foreign Minister Nothomb, assured US officials that site surveys for missiles could take place and were part of the TNF formula, provided they were done discreetly. Nothomb retains the foreign affairs portfolio and continues to support preliminary surveys. The new Defense Minister, Frank Swaelen, is also likely to continue the pro-TNF and pro-NATO policy of his predecessor, Francophone Liberal Charles Poswick. Swaelen, a prominent member of Martens' Flemish Social Christian Party, has little experience with defense questions, although he did chair a Social Christian committee charged with determining the party's position on TNF. Nothomb and Swaelen worked closely as leaders of the Social Christian party, and while the new Defense Minister has expressed skepticism at his colleague's "temporary enthusiasms," the two men should have a good working relationship. Swaelen, because of his political background, is likely to have a better feel for political realities in the cabinet than the more impulsive Poswick. []

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While Nothomb and Swaelen can be expected to support site surveys, the issue is potentially explosive for the Belgians. TNF supporters in the government will almost certainly insist that surveys be done very discreetly and at little or no cost to the Belgian government. Any publicity would probably result in a Socialist outcry. Given his other problems, Martens would have little stomach for combatting an upsurge in anti-TNF sentiments. ☐

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In order to avoid such pitfalls, Nothomb apparently intends to plant a parliamentary question on TNF during the foreign affairs budget debate on 15 November. He plans a low key statement indicating that the government's policy is to proceed with the necessary preliminary work for all contingencies relating to US-Soviet negotiations, presumably including site surveys. This vaguely worded response is designed to allow the Socialists to "look the other way" while surveys take place. It will, however, be very difficult to keep surveys secret for an extended period. Given past experience with Martens' performance on TNF, there is little reason for optimism that he will insist that surveys are part of the September formula should Socialist members of the government vigorously oppose this interpretation. ☐

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